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AUTHOR Stanton, Geoff
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ABSTRACT

This report draws on the first two years' experience, findings, and research of the seven strands of the Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Program to draw general conclusions about issues being addressed, progress made, and challenges remaining for colleges in the United Kingdom. It defines quality and achievement, describes the national context, and examines the relationship between college effectiveness and college improvement. These strategies for improving quality and achievement are discussed: recognize the need for and possibility of improvement; identify priority areas for improvement; set demanding but feasible targets; know the range of possible improvement tactics available; select the tactic(s) best fitted for the purpose; enable the tactic to match the context; create a realistic and costed action plan; and monitor the effects of initiatives on student success. A section describes each of the seven strands of RQA (research and evaluation; benchmarking and information; quality improvement team; best practice; development projects; leadership for achievement; and quality information and advice service) and identifies the following for each: issues being addressed, positive messages emerging, and remaining challenges faced by colleges. The final section summarizes factors RQA identified as making key contributions to the ongoing enhancement of quality and achievement. Appendixes include an annotated list of 18 publications for further reading and 21 references. (YLB)

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lessons learned on raising quality and achievement

Geoff Stanton

**raising quality
and achievement
programme**

- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges.
- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
- We offer extra support to colleges that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is sponsored by DfES and all activities are subsidised.

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raising quality
and achievement**

Geoff Stanton

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Feedback should be sent to:
Information Services
Learning and Skills Development Agency
3 Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EF.
Tel 020 7962 1066 Fax 020 7962 1258
enquiries@LSDA.org.uk

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Note

The Learning and Skills Development Agency
was formerly known as FEDA.

Further information

For further information on the issues discussed
in this publication please contact:
Anna Reisenberger, Manager
Quality Improvement Programmes
Learning and Skills Development Agency
3 Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EF.
Tel 020 7840 5323 Fax 020 7840 5401
areisenberger@LSDA.org.uk

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Preface

The Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme is a programme of action designed to help colleges improve both the quality of provision and the achievement of students. Funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) through the FE standards fund, it has worked primarily with colleges since April 1999. The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) manages the project, which has seven strands of activity and support:

- research and evaluation – investigating what works and why
- benchmarking and information – help with benchmarking activities, improving processes and making better use of colleges' own data
- the quality improvement team – onsite consultant support tailored to the college's needs when developing and implementing improvements
- best practice – networks, quality forums and process improvement packages to share and promote good practice
- development projects – 300 college-based action research projects on improving student retention and achievement
- leadership for achievement – help on improving leadership skills in order to improve students' achievement and the quality of provision
- quality information and advice service – a telephone helpline supported by information packs and the RQA website www.rqa.org.uk.

The first six of these strands are managed by LSDA, while the information and advice service is managed by the Association of Colleges (AoC).

Take-up of the programme has been very high, with most activities over-subscribed and over 90% satisfaction rates. Although we evaluate the impact of our support on a regular basis, challenges remain:

- how to help people learn from others' good practice
- what helps or hinders quality improvement across a college
- what works most effectively in different contexts
- why some colleges find it so difficult to adapt and embed new ideas.

These questions are addressed in this publication by Geoff Stanton, the external consultant whom we asked to read our reports and research findings, challenge the assumptions of the team and pull together our thinking on learner-centred improvement.

With the plethora of plans and strategies required, it is sometimes difficult for colleges to develop an overall improvement strategy. We hope this report will offer practical guidance on internal tactics and external support that have been shown to work.

Particular thanks to the LSDA development advisers Linda Bye, Peter Davies, Chris Horsfall, Muriel Green, Jane Owen, Paul Martinez, and Rosemary Clark of the AoC, for their contribution to this report and the discussions that led to it.

Anna Reisenberger
Manager, Raising Quality and Achievement

Introduction

This report draws on the first two years' experience, findings and research of the seven RQA strands in order to draw some general conclusions about:

- issues that are being addressed
- progress that has been made
- challenges that remain for colleges.

It also discusses the factors to be considered in producing an overall improvement strategy for a college, and how the different RQA strands could relate to these factors.

Because, up to now, the RQA Programme has worked with general FE and sixth form colleges, the conclusions of this report are placed in that context. However, many of the messages are general, and could be applied to much of the new learning and skills sector.

The content of this report will be of particular interest to:

- governors and senior staff of colleges
- team leaders and others in colleges who are responsible for improvement activities
- those in national and regional agencies responsible for monitoring and promoting quality and achievement.

It is particularly relevant to improvement plans required as part of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) improvement strategy, especially annual development plans to build on self-assessment, and costed action planning supported by the standards fund.

Defining quality and achievement

In focusing on both quality and achievement, the RQA Programme is mirroring the distinction made in the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) publication *The college governor*, where it is said:

Quality in further education relates chiefly to the students' experiences in the college.

On the other hand:

Standards in further education relate to the levels of achievement expected of and reached by students.

Because the word 'standards' is also used to refer to occupational standards – meaning what a candidate has to be able to know, understand and do to be considered competent in the workplace – the RQA Programme prefers to use the term 'achievement' for this second area.

A key indicator of achievement is, of course, the gaining of a recognised qualification. Also important is the proportion of its original intake that a college or course retains to the point of final assessment. Significant though these attainment and retention indicators are, it is important to realise that they are just that – indicators. High levels of attainment as measured by qualifications may conceal the fact that learners are being entered for examinations that do not stretch them, or that learners are receiving shallow learning that does not last, because they are being 'taught to the test'.

Conversely, there are other important outcomes, such as getting paid employment or gaining an increased confidence and willingness to learn, which may not be reflected in qualifications being gained by a predetermined date. Adult learners, in particular, may have personal learning goals other than those measured by standard qualifications, or may learn slower – or faster – than the assessment regime assumes.

It is important, therefore, to monitor quality in the form of institutional performance, as well as closely analysing learner performance as measured by qualifications. In its guidance to governors,¹ the FEFC suggested that the monitoring of quality involved such things as:

- investigating the extent to which the college experience meets learners' needs and expectations
- the care with which they are placed on courses
- the support and guidance provided to them
- the skill with which they are taught.

The national context

To put some of the lessons emerging from the RQA Programme into context, it helps to recall the recent history of further education at national level.

Immediately after incorporation in 1993 the challenge for colleges was to be **more efficient** while not lowering standards. The aim was to cater for more students at lower unit cost, and many of the related developments were in fields such as marketing, the use of distance or resource-based learning, and the allocation and management of staff time.

Incorporation also meant that colleges took on responsibilities for the management of finance, personnel and estates from local education authorities. At the same time, the FEFC (and training and enterprise councils, TECs, that funded government-supported training) introduced new funding mechanisms, designed – among other things – to encourage efficiency. Many colleges also inherited serious problems with regard to their buildings and equipment. Even when they did not, the need for increased efficiency required adaptations to their plant.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that although new qualifications frameworks were also being introduced, senior staff were preoccupied with the **development of systems** for managing finances, staff and physical resources.

As far as governors were concerned, a significant issue was the requirement to produce a strategic plan for the college. Their involvement in this, and in business planning, were the two aspects of governance most commonly mentioned in the first round of inspection reports.²

As the new inspection regime got under way, it too became an important influence on the developmental priorities of colleges. Among the five aspects of cross-college provision that inspectors reported were students' recruitment, guidance and support, and quality assurance. In many colleges, systems for both aspects were embryonic, or operated at a departmental rather than a college level. Very soon, however, student support services were formalised and quality managers appointed – though not usually at as senior a level as directors of finance or human resources

With regard to quality assurance, the then Chief Inspector for FEFC, Terry Melia, wrote in 2001 :

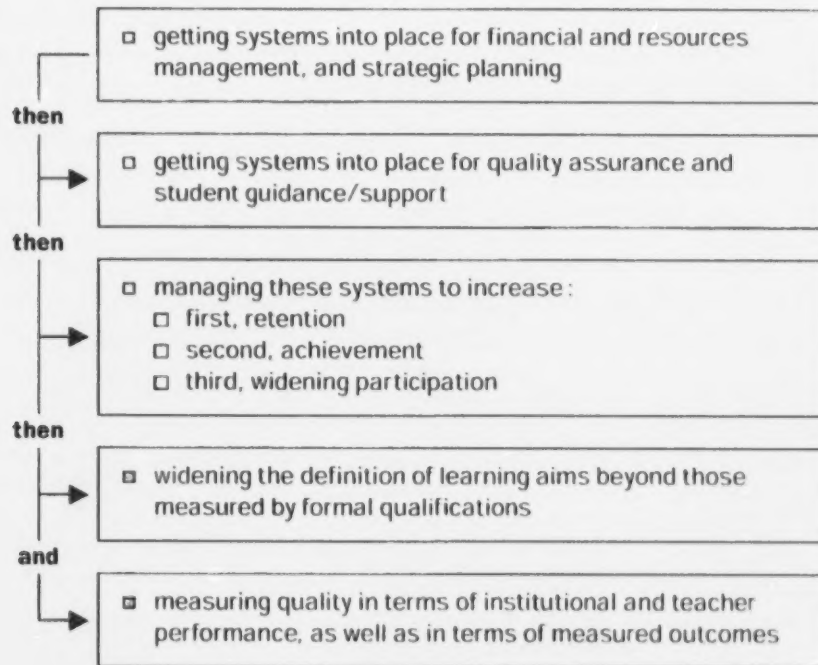
Anyone who remembers the crude quality assurance arrangements in FE colleges at the beginning of the 1990s and the elementary or non-existent management information systems that were then in place, cannot but be amazed at the great strides that the sector has taken in these areas in the last decade.³

Nevertheless, right up until the advent of the LSC in 2001, FEFC inspectors continued to report that quality assurance was not a strength in many colleges.⁴

It is fair to say that for many colleges improving student retention was given more priority at first than increasing levels of achievement. This was because the financial penalties when students left a course early were more severe than when they stayed but failed to achieve. (The FEFC had well-founded reasons for not wishing to increase the proportion of funding linked to achievement. This could have distorted recruitment and assessment processes.⁵) As the inspection regime paid more attention to achievement rates, and as the developing Individualised Student Record (ISR) produced relevant data and benchmarks, this situation changed. One sign of this was that the aspect of governance most commonly mentioned in inspection reports became 'monitoring college performance'.⁶ However, the new Ofsted/ALI inspection regime, paying as it does more attention to classroom observation, is showing, in early reports, weaknesses in teaching quality even when apparently well-designed systems of quality assurance and student support are in place.

In addition, since 1997, the Labour Government has given increased emphasis to the reduction of social exclusion by widening participation in further education, and to improvements in provision through collaboration and partnerships rather than competition.

At the risk of dangerous over-simplification, the above narrative could be summarised as the following decade-long sequence of developments:



Therefore, it could be said that – having created a much more sophisticated system for quantifying the extent of institutional and individual success and failure than ever before – FE colleges are poised to move into an era of continuing improvement. However, some of the national and local approaches to the management of change that were appropriate for stimulating and controlling the earlier changes may now need to evolve into a different form of leadership that enables institutions and staff themselves to continue to learn.

This learning needs to be focused unequivocally on enhancing the achievement and experience of learners. This statement may sound obvious, but with ongoing and radical changes to such things as qualifications frameworks, funding and inspection regimes, and systems of governance, it is easy for colleges to regard these as ends in themselves. Easy access to a service that provides up-to-date information on national initiatives, and advice on implementing them, can assist colleges to go further than this, and use the initiatives to deliver more fundamental aims.

Given the extent to which the enhancement of quality and achievement derives from the activities of teams of staff, the importance of leadership at all levels has to be recognised, and not just at the level of the senior management team. Similarly, staff at all levels can contribute to and even initiate activities that lead to improvement.

Improvement need not (and cannot) wait for the whole institution to be ready, but does flourish best when part of an overall strategy, and when the culture is supportive. Once again, all staff can contribute to this, but there is no denying the key responsibility of senior staff and governors.

College effectiveness and college improvement

Put simply, **effectiveness** is concerned with measured educational outcomes, and identifying those factors in colleges that appear to correlate with effectiveness – what makes a 'good' college. **Improvement** is concerned with how colleges can become better and continue to improve, and tends therefore to be more associated with processes – how to make a college 'good'.

Some see effectiveness and improvement as different points on the same spectrum, rather than as opposites or alternatives. At one extreme, it may be presumed that effectiveness can be achieved by the imitation of good practice already developed elsewhere. There are occasions when this can be the means of quickly improving the service offered to students, and there is certainly no justification for spending resources unnecessarily on reinventing the wheel. However:

- rarely, if ever, can practices and procedures be transferred without adaptation (or even further development) to make them fit for the new context – and adaptation and transfer require staff time and skill
- in many cases the effectiveness of 'good practice' depends on it being part of a portfolio of measures
- inappropriately mechanistic methods of introducing new practices can:
 - damage the prospects of the practice becoming sustained within the college
 - inhibit the development of the capacity of the staff to become sources of good practice themselves.

These factors may mean that in some cases it is perfectly cost effective to take staff through (possibly an accelerated version of) the processes of diagnosis and development that led to the original good practice, rather than attempting a simple transplant.

At the other extreme, it may be assumed that improvement can only be produced through the willing participation of all staff in 'home-grown' developments. Although at its best this approach can energise the staff and ensure that innovations are integrated and fit for local purpose, it also has to be recognised that, apart from the urgency of some situations:

- ❑ awareness of what has been achieved elsewhere can be a stimulus to improvement
- ❑ building on others' good practice can give great professional satisfaction, particularly if due status is given to the process of adaptation (some have called it 'transformation') that is required to make it work in a new context
- ❑ sometimes empowerment comes from involvement, rather than being a prerequisite for it.

Networking with other colleges can also contribute to staff confidence and professional growth so that staff become more effective agents for change within their own institution.

Strategies for improving quality and achievement

Conclusions shared by the whole RQA team include :

- ongoing college improvement requires a holistic rather than a piecemeal approach
- although there are a number of potentially effective **tactics**, a college needs a **strategy** within which to select and implement these.

This is an important message for the governors and principals of colleges. It is equally important for other staff such as team leaders to understand what is involved in this if they are effectively to argue the case for the necessary developments.

There is no single strategy that suits all cases. It is, however, possible to identify a list of factors that need to be addressed as part of an effective strategy.

In practice, each of the RQA strands can contribute, to differing degrees, to most of these, and there is no one starting point. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to suggest a sequence of activities, and to describe the strands in relation to these.

The continuing improvement of quality (institutional performance) and achievement (student success) depends on the capacity of a college and its staff to :

- recognise the need for and possibility of improvement
- identify priority areas for improvement
- set demanding but feasible targets
- know of the range of possible improvement tactics available
- select the tactic(s) best fit for purpose, in the light of the :
 - nature of the problem
 - institutional context

- enable the tactic to match the context
- create a realistic and costed action plan
- monitor the effects of initiatives on student success.

Recognising the need for and possibility of improvement

This is a fundamental factor. It means recognising that whatever the characteristics of a local population or the circumstances of the college there are actions within the control of its staff that can enhance quality and achievement.

This recognition may be inhibited by a preoccupation with other significant influences that **are** beyond the control of a college, and by staff who have no recent personal experience that would enable them to make comparisons with what has been achieved elsewhere. Enabling staff to come to this recognition, through their own investigations, for instance, can be more productive than edicts that risk promoting a 'blame culture'.

Activities that can develop and sharpen this recognition include various kinds of benchmarking. Metric benchmarking, particularly the statistical comparison of retention and achievement rates, has become much more firmly established since the incorporation of colleges and the creation of central databases such as the ISR. (This is being renamed the Individual Learner Record – ILR – by the LSC.) However, there is a less well-developed understanding of the extent to which differences in learner success rates can be accounted for by differences in institutional ethos, systems, procedures and practices, rather than being determined by demographic factors.

Inter-college differences in retention and achievement remain large – especially in achievement. At the most, though, only about half of the achievement gap between the best and the worst achieving colleges can be attributed to differences in the characteristics of their student bodies.

The research and evaluation strand can provide evidence for the fact that there is only a relatively weak correlation between the deprivation level of student bodies and overall rates of achievement. More positively, this strand also shows that the achievement gap is closing as weaker colleges improve their performance.⁷

The benchmarking and information strand can provide a range of advice and instruments that enables college staff, and not just senior staff, to make useful comparisons with not only the performance but also the procedures of other organisations.⁸

Identifying areas for improvement

At a general level, the research report *Closing the achievement gap* identifies a wide range of factors that contribute to raising student achievement under the headings of:

- strategic commitment
- college-wide approaches
- recruitment, placement and induction
- design and delivery of the curriculum
- tutorial and other support
- teaching and pedagogy
- monitoring, evaluation and follow up.

It is worth using these headings, and the half dozen or so items listed under each, as a checklist to ensure that the areas considered for improvement are not confined to those currently fashionable, those that reflect the collective 'mind-set', or those that are the easiest to tackle.

More specific ideas can come from various forms of benchmarking. Comparisons of outcomes can be made with sections or colleges working in similar contexts. Comparisons of processes can be made with other sections of the college, other colleges, or non-educational organisations.

In some cases an external eye is useful to provide an initial needs assessment. Such diagnosis forms the first stage of the service offered by consultants from the RQA's quality improvement team (QIT).

When choosing the area for improvement, it is important to:

- bear in mind that parallel improvements in other areas may be required for it to be effective
- consider the 'opportunity cost' – that is, which activity produces the most effect for the least cost, and what will not be being done while the chosen area receives priority

- identify what will count as success in terms of improvements in student achievements and experience and not just in terms of the planned change. (However difficult it was to achieve, putting a particular mechanism in place is, of course, a means rather than an end in itself.)

All of these factors are relevant to the conduct of college self-assessment exercises, and the definition of the resultant action plans.⁹

Setting demanding but feasible targets

This requires :

- a clear and accurate picture of the current state of play in the college or section
- awareness of the levels of performance achieved by comparable institutions or sections.

The current picture should come from the college information system (CIS), but does not always do so in a form that teachers find useful. At worst, management information is seen as data collected for the benefit of funding and inspection agencies, which can be used to allocate blame. At best, it becomes part of the professional life of all staff, used to enable them to better manage the learning of their customers. We will return to the related questions of empowerment and institutional ethos.

Often the CIS fails to collect data that would be useful to the college but is not required by external agencies such as funding bodies.¹⁰ Examples include data resulting from satisfaction surveys or statistics relating to staff turnover.

Awareness of comparative performance can come from various kinds of benchmarking. The RQA Programme can put colleges in contact with appropriate benchmarking partners, for instance through the process improvement brokerage service, and can offer the partners support in planning to improve practice.

Awareness of the range of possible improvement tactics available

Identifying an area or areas that require improvement is one thing: knowing how to go about achieving that improvement is quite another. It is common for colleges to be in the habit of using only a limited range of tactics. At worst, there may be a belief that simply alerting staff to the need for change is enough to achieve it.

Colleges can engage in different ways with external sources of support. The RQA Programme offers a range of direct and indirect support tactics:

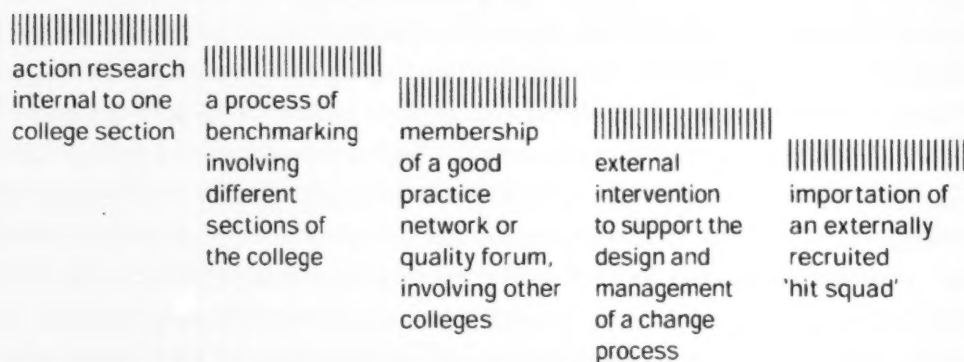
- ❑ In specific areas, written guides have been produced to alert readers to possible tactics and offer case studies of what has proved effective elsewhere.¹¹
- ❑ The RQA information and advice service can put colleges into contact with others who have relevant and successful experience. Some have even arranged for whole teams of staff to go on study visits to such colleges.
- ❑ Membership of networks that share experience of good practice, such as those managed by the best practice strand, can both alert participants to a range of possible activities and support them as they engage in the process of implementing them in their own context.
- ❑ Appropriately designed benchmarking can be a way of achieving change, as well as identifying the need for it. For instance, paired colleges can produce and compare flowcharts for key processes, such as initial assessment, from which strengths and weaknesses can be identified.
- ❑ External consultants, such as those in the quality improvement team, can go beyond a diagnostic role to stimulate or manage change, if that is desired.
- ❑ Action research or development projects can encompass initial diagnosis, planning change, implementation, and evaluation of results (though it is common for the diagnostic process to be confined to the investigation of possible tactics, rather than going back to first principles to select the area for investigation).

Selecting the tactic(s) best fit for purpose

There is no one right way to achieve the changes necessary for improvement, but that does not mean that every tactic is suitable for every kind of change, or that tactics can be chosen without reference to the stage of development reached by colleges and their staff.

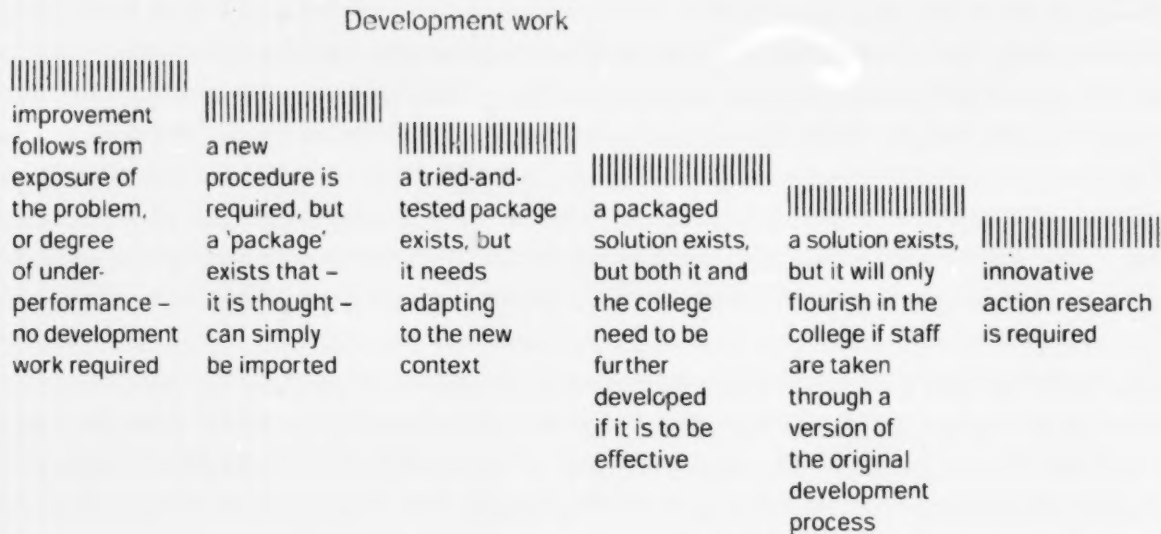
One dimension to consider is the balance between internal activity and input from outside the college. For instance, various tactics could be placed on a spectrum as follows:

Internal and external input



The final item is obviously a tactic of last resort, but which of the other approaches, or combination of them, is to be used needs to be considered in the light of the nature of the issue and the stage of development of the college.

Another dimension depends on the degree to which development work is assumed to be required or desirable. The spectrum here might be:

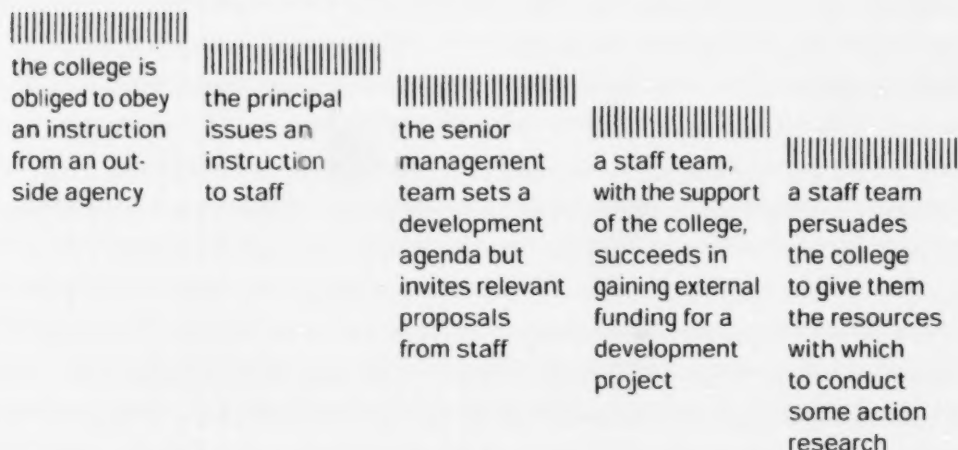


Findings from the RQA Programme suggest that although knowledge of comparative performance and effective practice elsewhere can provide an incentive to change, sustained improvement requires a combination of the activities further along this spectrum.

A third dimension is the extent to which the initiative for action comes from the top or bottom of the college, or somewhere in between. This may go back to the question of who is given access to college information. It does not help staff to own and put energy into the solution of problems and the implementation of improvements if their managers monopolise the analysis of data and are solely responsible for deciding what action is required.

One way of using the talents and developing the insights of more staff is to involve them in action research on improving performance. Therefore, the spectrum of possibilities here may be something like the following :

Involving staff



In general, the further along this spectrum a college can move to involve staff the better.

Enabling the tactic to match the context

There are two aspects to this. The first is recognition that both developmental activities and examples of good practice will require modification if they are to be effective in the context of another college. It is clear from the best practice strand that knowledge of what has been effective elsewhere needs to be seen as a stimulus to thought and planning, rather than a way of bypassing these processes.

Second, crucial to whether or not an initiative will flourish, is the general culture of the college and its various sections. Consultants from the quality improvement team have noted the variations in organisational culture between and within colleges. They have analysed those negative characteristics that they say are the real core of both the problems and the solutions. Unless tackled,

these will make sustainable change unlikely. QIT has also described the features that make up a positive culture.¹² Not surprisingly, the features that make for a learning organisation mirror those that enable students to learn: mutual respect, honest feedback, good communication, shared values, recognition that not all staff can learn at the same rate, the freedom to learn from mistakes.

The leadership for achievement strand of the RQA Programme emphasises the crucial role of those who create and lead teaching teams, and who manage frontline staff. It is vital that such people have the freedom and skills to raise expectations and lead ongoing development and review, yet their training and support needs are relatively neglected.

Creating a realistic action plan

The need of many colleges for support in project design, resourcing and management has been noted in the best practice and development project strands, as well as by QIT consultants. If not addressed this will cause the performance gap between colleges to widen. Weaker colleges fail to get their bids for external support accepted, or fail to maintain the momentum or effectiveness of initiatives they start. College managers may underestimate the staff time required to turn ideas into effective action. Staff may find that their own sphere of influence is not sufficient to establish and sustain the necessary changes. Above all, they may not know which are the most effective improvement strategies to address the weaknesses they, or inspectors, have identified.

External consultancy, such as that offered by the quality improvement team, can help with diagnosis and planning and can draw on knowledge of what works across the college sector. An information pack produced by the RQA information and advice service provides guidance on writing costed action plans. Appropriately managed programmes of college-based projects, such as those in the development project strand, can give advice on initial plans and offer consultancy support if an initiative is in trouble. Similarly, managed networks such as those provided by the best practice strand can provide support from more experienced colleges. The leadership for achievement strand has developed training programmes to optimise the effectiveness of crucial staff teams and help them keep their focus on learner achievement.

As mentioned earlier, college self-assessment reports should be a major source of action plans that aim to enhance student achievement and the learning experience. These should not only remedy identified weaknesses but also build on strengths.

Monitoring the effects of initiatives on student success

The absence of monitoring is a common failing and affects the impact of initiatives on improving students' success.

Because of the difficulty in implementing improvement plans under the day-to-day pressures of college life, it is tempting to regard an initiative as a success simply because a new procedure (for instance) has been put into place. It is always possible, of course, that other processes would have had a greater effect on student achievement, or that parallel changes are required for maximum impact. These lessons cannot be learned unless some attempt is made to quantify the effect of an initiative. The key indicators will nearly always be levels of achievement as measured by qualifications. In the recent past it has been common to focus solely on retention, possibly because of its effect on college income. It has to be remembered, of course, that retention is itself only a means to an end.

There will be occasions when the achievement of qualifications is not a satisfactory proxy for all the intended learning outcomes, in which case the challenge is to define alternative measures of success so that the work can be evaluated.

The RQA development projects require measurement of learning outcomes as part of their specification. The research and evaluation and benchmarking strands offer advice on how to analyse the available data and how to design instruments with which to collect data not provided by qualifications.

The overall strategy

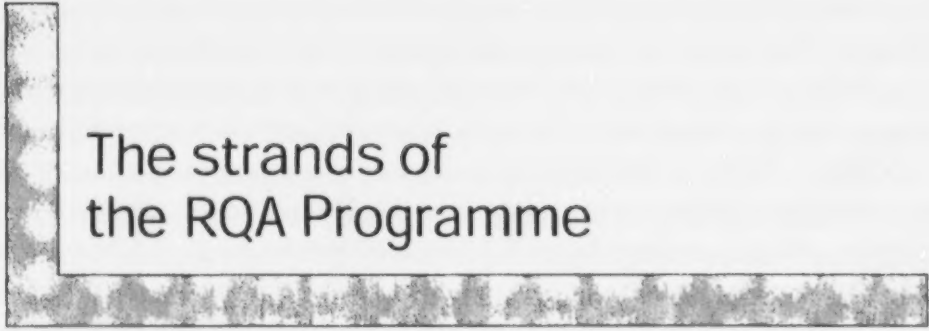
An effective improvement strategy not only has to take account of these issues, it has to derive from an unambiguous intention by all concerned to place enhancing the quality of the student experience and optimising learner achievement at the centre of their concerns. While this should be both a top-down and bottom-up process, governors¹³ and senior managers have a particular responsibility to ensure that individual efforts and action plans form part of an overall strategy, and as far as possible are integrated into a coherent whole.

The implementation of a strategy is an ongoing process, requiring continuing development, monitoring and support. Governors can contribute to this by:

- ensuring that they are able to monitor the educational performance of the college, as well as its financial and organisational strength
- checking that college information systems enable all staff to take more effective professional decisions
- helping to foster leadership at all levels that ensures the existence or creation of an institutional culture within which improvements will be embedded and continue.

None of this is meant to imply that individual members of staff are powerless to act in the absence of an adequate whole-college strategy. Significant improvements can be achieved in specific areas, local strategies can be created, and individuals can argue for and contribute to a whole-college strategy if they understand what is required.

It will have been noted that the need for effective leadership has been a thread running through this section. This is required at all levels, and not just for senior managers. The leadership for achievement strand provides support both for team leaders, who have direct influence on teachers' day-to-day interactions with students, and governors who have a strategic role in overseeing improvements in college performance.



The strands of the RQA Programme

This section briefly describes each strand of activity and support in turn, and identifies for each:

- the issues being addressed
- positive messages emerging
- remaining challenges faced by colleges.

Research and evaluation

Description

This strand has a number of parallel activities, but the findings summarised below arose from investigations into:

- the extent to which inter-institutional differences in the FE sector achievement rates can be explained by differences in the profile of enrolled students
- the relationship between differences in student achievement and differences in institutional practices.

The main sources of data have been:

- the FEFC's ISR
- mapping ISR data against MOSAIC geodemographic classifications
- questionnaire surveys of staff satisfaction and opinion
- questionnaire surveys of student satisfaction and their opinion of specified aspects of their college experience
- visits by consultants to colleges with a range of achievement rates.

The work can be further explored in: *Differential achievement* (FEDA 2000) and *Closing the achievement gap* (FEDA 2000).¹⁴

Issues being addressed

Inter-college differences in retention and achievement remain large – especially the latter.

Worst achieving colleges have higher than average proportions of students with demographic characteristics associated with below average achievement. At the most, though, differences in the relative demographic profiles of student bodies, as identified by analysis of the ISR, can account for only half of the 'achievement gap' between the best and worst achieving colleges.

There is only a weak correlation between the deprivation of student bodies and overall rates of achievement. Differences in institutional ethos, systems, procedures and practices account for the significant remainder of the achievement gap.

Initial attempts by colleges to improve student retention seem to have occurred largely in response to the impact of the FEFC funding mechanism. Recent attention to improving retention and achievement appears to be linked more with reports from the second round of inspections, which were much more assiduous than the first in highlighting performances that fell below expected levels.

There is a positive correlation between staff satisfaction and student satisfaction – the latter already known to be positively correlated with student retention and achievement. On average, staff satisfaction is worryingly low, especially within general FE and tertiary colleges.¹⁵

Positive messages

In general, colleges have substantial scope to influence retention and achievement. Learner opinion about certain aspects of the college experience is strongly correlated with retention and achievement, which provides an indication of which interventions are likely to prove most productive.

Higher achieving colleges have made raising achievement a strategic priority at an earlier date, and been relatively more successful at embedding a continuous improvement culture.

Characteristics of effective practice¹⁶ include:

- ❑ the prioritisation of student achievement within the strategic plan
- ❑ the regular consideration of achievement data by the senior management team and governors
- ❑ the establishment and use of benchmarks and achievement targets
- ❑ effective communication to staff of the importance of raising achievement
- ❑ a culture of high expectations of both staff and students
- ❑ responsibility and authority at curriculum leader and course team level
- ❑ effective monitoring and action planning, with regular face-to-face meetings between managers and staff
- ❑ the encouragement of 'bottom-up' initiatives within a college-wide strategy framework
- ❑ regular review of teacher performance, supported by tailored staff development.

The achievement gap is closing year on year as worst achieving colleges improve their achievement rates faster than the best – an expected trend if improvements in student achievement are susceptible to interventions at college level.

Remaining challenges

Interventions at college-level ought to be capable of reducing the achievement gap between low and high-achieving colleges to half its present size, or less. All colleges should be able to deliver an overall achievement rate at the level of the current median.

Some areas are less developed than others and need particular attention:

- ❑ there is still a very wide gap between typical and best practice in the management and use of college information systems
- ❑ changes in course delivery that follow from the identification of retention and achievement problems are often not followed through thoroughly enough
- ❑ colleges display much more success in identifying weaknesses and acting on them than in sharing effective practice (either internally or with other colleges).

A demotivated workforce – irrespective of the reasons this may have occurred – is likely to be a major impediment to the implementation of strategies to improve student performance. Colleges where this is the case need to confront the problem.

Benchmarking and information

Description

This strand helps colleges to assess their processes, to make better use of the information they already have, to collect other data, and to benchmark their services against others who are recognised as leaders in a field, or with whom legitimate comparisons can be made. It does this through:

- Learning PROBE, a diagnostic benchmarking tool that allows colleges to self-assess and compare themselves with others
- written guides to both benchmarking and college information systems
- a database of organisations willing to take part in benchmarking projects
- support for target setting and using data for planning
- metric benchmarking tools including questionnaires on staff and student satisfaction
- support for producing action plans following the use of questionnaires
- introducing colleges to process benchmarking
- helping colleges through their initial benchmarking projects.

Issues being addressed

There is a wide range of information with the potential to contribute to raising quality and achievement available to colleges. For a variety of reasons its potential is often not realised.

Data already being produced for a funding body or the inspectorate is not always made available at a time or in a format that allows staff to use it to better manage their own work. Some colleges now refer to college information systems (CIS) rather than management information systems (MIS) to emphasise that the information should be freely available and used by all.

Other data, such as that relating to staff turnover or student complaints, is either not centrally collated or not always analysed so as to identify learning points or the need for development work. For instance, because many colleges classify complaints as formal or informal, with only the former being written, the data available may greatly underestimate the number of complaints being made. This can mean that important signals are missed pointing to issues that, if addressed early, could be resolved before they become major problems.

A third category of data is that specifically generated by colleges although not required by external agencies, for instance via questionnaires issued to staff or students.

If the experience of staff is that data analysed by external agencies or by management is used to allocate blame or find fault, it may be difficult for them to see such things as complaints analysis or satisfaction surveys as indicating opportunities for improvement.

Similarly, if benchmarking is perceived primarily as a monitoring device used by inspectors or funders, then staff may be wary of becoming involved. However, once staff are involved in benchmarking as a means of learning from other's effective practice (and mistakes) – and as a diagnostic tool – there does appear to be considerable enthusiasm.

Although metric benchmarking (the comparison of measurable inputs and outputs) is best known, process benchmarking (the mapping and comparison of educational procedures) is starting to generate considerable interest, partly perhaps because it is not connected in the minds of staff with such things as league tables.

Already 80 colleges are using the same RQA staff satisfaction survey to benchmark themselves against others in the sector. This also allows comparisons between different types of college. It is possible to correlate results from this survey with those that investigate student satisfaction, and with retention and achievement statistics. (See the research and evaluation strand, page 23.) As the results are anonymous, colleges may feel more comfortable dealing with feedback that would otherwise be considered negative and so not published. As it is, areas for improvement can be identified and acted on.

Learning PROBE (Promoting Business Excellence) is a diagnostic benchmarking tool that covers practice and performance across a broad range of issues, including leadership, service processes, people and performance management. The process involves staff from across the college and from all levels in the hierarchy. The results give organisations an indication of their strengths and weaknesses and allow them to compare their performance against other organisations. It has proved very popular, and has revealed a number of common areas of weakness.

Positive messages

Some colleges have advanced considerably over the last two years in their use of targets and information systems.

College information systems that give a clear and timely picture of the current state of play, combined with benchmarking activities that show what is possible, can be used to identify feasible but challenging targets.

The use of various kinds of benchmarking to diagnose need and to promote learning and development is increasing.

Colleges are showing considerable interest in methods of learning from complaints.

Remaining challenges

There remains considerable variability in the sophistication with which colleges use information.

Data – both that required by the funding body and other – is often not used to feed into the planning cycle, and many staff are not aware of what data is available.

Both the Learning PROBE and the staff satisfaction surveys indicate that staff are concerned about inadequate consultation/communication and management styles that do not encourage a culture within which staff feel they can contribute creatively to quality improvement.

Quality improvement team

Description

The RQA Programme has trained and continues to support a team of consultants – the quality improvement team. They offer onsite consultancy to help colleges:

- make more accurate self-assessments
- draw up costed action plans for different areas of college performance and in order to access the standards fund
- implement the planned actions
- monitor and confirm progress.

In general, the consultants diagnose the barriers to the changes necessary for improvement, and identify possible ways of overcoming them.

Each college is entitled to a one-day free visit for an initial needs assessment, and for help in compiling the action plan required in order to access the standards fund. Colleges that have been inspected since September 1997 receive a further three days of free consultancy. There is a subsidised rate for the purchase of further days. Approximately 80% of colleges have received some help from the team.

Issues being addressed

The QIT approach depends on effective initial scoping of what is involved so that the most appropriate consultant is identified; this has been shown to be a particular strength in achieving effective outcomes. The process starts when initial telephone contact is made with the strand leader, but when the designated consultant has completed his or her own needs analysis on site, it is possible for the work to be referred to another consultant if it emerges that a different set of skills is required.

Typically the work of QIT consultants involves responding to requests from college management to tackle relatively straightforward, visible issues that are reasonably easy to resolve in the short term. However, behind these are often other unidentified, more complex strategic and cultural issues that lie at the core of both the problems and the solutions. If not tackled these will make sustainable change unlikely.

Colleges vary in organisational culture. Indeed, a college can contain a number of 'subcultures' or even 'factions' that can be contradictory. Some may be resistant to change and reluctant to share practice, while others are much more positive.

Positive messages

Consultancy has been most effective when there has been :

- full awareness and support from the senior staff and principal
- a commitment to a holistic approach and an awareness of how the particular assignment fits with the bigger picture
- a very clear brief, which has not changed dramatically since the initial discussion
- inclusive diagnosis of the issue, not just by one manager, and all the staff involved have a common view of the issues.

The ability of an organisation to sustain effective change depends on its learning capability. This is enhanced by ensuring that staff :

- are engaged in learning rather than being blamed for mistakes
- benefit from systems that support the 'vision' of the college, facilitate the recognition of problems and enable a fast response
- become less dependent and are able to take control and responsibility
- are genuinely self-critical rather than being in denial, mechanically compliant or subversive.

An improvement culture is usually based on a concise, communicable and achievable vision, that is shared, agreed and supported by well-understood values. This is more to do with leadership of people than with management of systems.

Remaining challenges

Organisational effectiveness and improvement are too often impeded by lack of attendance to these culture issues.

Quality assurance frequently relies too heavily on a special department and on the requirement to comply with a manual of procedures. There is also a tendency for senior managers to make many college systems too elaborate.

There may be a failure to recognise that in a learning college the relationship between staff and their managers is as important as the staff's relationship with the learners, and similarly needs to be based on mutual respect.

There is often a lack of awareness among teaching staff of the wider context within which they are working. This can result in a culture of dependency, with an over-readiness to ascribe responsibility and blame to management or policy-makers.

Leadership needs to be fostered at all levels of the college, and not just seen as a function of managers. Senior staff need consistently to demonstrate the primacy of their concern for the quality of the student experience and the level of their achievement.

Best practice

Description

This strand aims to identify, share and develop best practice. It does this through three types of activity:

- **effective practice networks** members, who pay a subscription, meet termly in subject-based groups to share interesting and effective practice, seek information and advice and become involved in joint development activities
- **quality forums** meet termly on a regional basis to benefit from national updates, good practice case studies, group problem-solving activities, and opportunities to network
- **support for the transfer of best practice** through events and materials celebrating best practice, and organising residential events for grade 1 colleges to help them transfer their experience to others more effectively. There is also a process improvement package that enables colleges to produce flowcharts to describe key educational processes and broker partnerships so that they can compare themselves with others, learn from their effective practice, and engage in supported development work.

Issues being addressed

Although the terms 'good practice' and 'best practice' are in common use, it is often more useful to refer to 'potentially effective practice'. This is because there is an art in identifying where and how others' practices will fit in one's own organisation. This ability has to be positively developed, and may require training.

Sharing good practice should be seen as a stimulus for change and development, rather than an end in itself. It should not be seen as offering a 'quick fix' solution. Knowledge of such things as strategies, models, approaches and materials can inform thinking and planning, but actual improvement requires the support of senior management, and development, usually with a team of staff, over time.

Sometimes good practice has received external recognition, for instance through inspection. Where this has not happened, the absence of validation can mean that there are no objective criteria against which to judge some proffered good practice, or – conversely – that more modest practitioners may be reluctant to have their work so described.

Exciting ideas can backfire if:

- practitioners find that the pressures of everyday life in their colleges make them difficult to implement, or if they cannot afford to invest the time necessary to win the support of 'significant others'
- they are perceived as a step too far in the light of the stage of development the college has reached, so that teachers and managers feel overawed.

Positive messages

Information can be shared about strategies, models, systems and processes, and through a variety of means – such as publications, websites and conferences. Evaluation has shown that this does stimulate thinking and development, and has also provided additional information about how the intelligence can be used.

However, networks that are membership organisations add a further dimension, because of the continuity of contact and the opportunity to share in collaborative work. Further development activities may build on the practice or adapt it for a new context. This work may take place within or outside meetings. Funded development work coordinated through networks can:

- ❑ provide a structure and focus for collaborative activities
- ❑ develop the skills and experience of participants.

In particular, having to think in terms of 'what can be achieved by when' has encouraged participants to focus on which aspects of others' practice they wish to adopt and develop.

A brokerage service that also offers individual consultancy can not only introduce colleges to appropriate partners, but also support a rigorous evaluation of starting points, and focused development planning. This has been effectively applied to specific processes, such as the development of staff teams or the initial assessment of students. The production of a flowchart that represents the chosen process enables staff to compare and contrast their approaches, to identify where problems occur in their processes and to plan for improvement.

Cascade training is another method of disseminating good practice that has been applied to the management and process of tutoring. Some colleges involved in the training have also produced training materials, including a video, and others have set up informal consortia.

Colleges that are a source of good practice can be encouraged to put time and effort into transferring their expertise to others if the process offers them opportunities and resources for further innovative development.

Remaining challenges

Some exercises in promoting 'good practice' focus on sharing information and materials, as opposed to the greater challenge of developing effective means of transferring potentially effective practice to different contexts.

Sensitivity must be shown with regard to the time demanded of those asked to share their good practice, and the impact on their current activities.

Colleges that are strong on quality improvement tend to participate fully in networking, whereas colleges that are less strong are either not involved or may fail to support their staff in taking ideas forward back at college. The challenge of engaging those who do not see the need for or benefit of such contact probably requires a combination of relevant comparisons of what is being achieved by others, and a demonstration of how improvement can pay for itself by increasing recruitment, retention and achievement.

In curriculum areas, particularly, it has been difficult for practitioners to get release from teaching to attend regularly. If networks are attended by managers, they may need training and support in developing their ability subsequently to involve their colleagues in improvement activity.

Development projects

Description

Colleges are funded to participate in structured development projects. The strand aims to:

- encourage and evaluate approaches to raising achievement
- support action research to develop effective practice models and materials
- develop the skills of action research in the sector
- disseminate the resulting experience, knowledge and materials as widely as possible.

Over 160 colleges have already reported; 200 more projects are under way. They vary in size, location and level of performance. Approaches may be top-down, bottom-up or shared. The project interventions may be cross college or confined to a specific section.

Issues being addressed

Colleges vary in their ability to plan and undertake improvement activities. Significant variations in performance and rates of improvement persist despite the national focus on quality assurance and quality improvement processes in recent years.

There have been a large number of college-based development projects sponsored by various agencies over the past decade. However, the impact of projects on learner achievement has rarely been measured or evaluated.

Despite the tradition of project work in further education, there has been no development of theoretical models or coherent body of literature relating to college effectiveness or college improvement. This contrasts with the situation as it applies to schools.

Positive messages

The RQA Programme approach has been largely successful in enhancing colleges' ability to undertake development projects.

A small amount of money (approximately £2500) has been offered to a large number of colleges to undertake action research. More importantly, perhaps, the approach demands a clear focus, offers consultant support, requires quantitative measures of outcomes, but gives some flexibility in completion dates.

The most common feature of the projects is an unambiguous focus on changing the student experience.

This may involve work on tutoring, curriculum design, teaching methods, learning support, attendance monitoring and follow-up and target setting.

One of the most commonly mentioned methods for raising achievement for 16-18 year olds is the formative use of value-added measures and target setting. This involves not only setting grade targets but also providing advice on how to achieve them.

Projects are most effective where the staff have self-belief, a commitment to put students first, emphasise leadership across the college, share ownership of college improvement processes, and can work effectively as a team. They also benefit from supportive systems and an emphasis on professional development.

The case studies produced as a result of the RQA action research projects, and overarching analytical and evaluative reports produced by LSDA, now provide one of the largest bodies of literature on improvement processes in post-compulsory education.

Remaining challenges

Performance remains variable within and between colleges. There is some evidence of even more variation in school sixth forms, work-based learning, and adult and continuing education.

Improvement projects are being hampered by:

- an unhelpful conceptualisation of retention issues as different and separate from achievement issues
- low staff morale and self-esteem, and a feeling among staff of being undervalued
- poor or undeveloped skills in researching and diagnosing performance problems within institutions.

Low performing teams usually have problems with diagnosis, and often their managers do not know how to help. There may be an initial problem in owning or recognising the problem. When this has been overcome, some teams leap for a favoured solution without considering alternative causes and remedies.

Some action research is completed satisfactorily but does not get to the expected outcome. This indicates a failure of diagnosis, or lack of ongoing feedback. In other cases the work is not completed. This is sometimes because of staff turnover, suggesting that the institution has not owned the initiative or maintained its priority.

In some colleges there continues to be an unhelpful tension between curriculum design and teaching on the one hand, and student support services on the other. This can show up as a failure of students to access the support they need, possibly because the subject teachers are not convinced of its value.

For a variety of reasons, colleges have not yet developed adequate ways of measuring the impact of support processes on retention and achievement. At the same time, some action research concentrates exclusively on the development of student support, when there is evidence that teaching processes also need improvement.

Leadership for achievement

Description

This strand is concerned with the development and application of leadership skills at all levels, in order to raise quality and achievement. It provides workshops and seminars for governors and team leaders. It has produced written guidance on the connection between governance and the raising of achievement,¹⁷ and a report for all staff on leadership.¹⁸ It is conducting research into the role of leadership at team level.

Issues being addressed

There is a need to recognise the contribution made to the improvement of quality and student achievement by those who build and lead staff teams. Effective leadership is required at all levels, and is not just a function of managers.

There is a need to develop in senior staff the ability to give effective leadership, and not just to manage systems and resources, important though these are. Attending to people and getting the best from them is key to the creation of quality learning experiences and to promoting achievement.

Governors may lack confidence in their ability to oversee the work of professional educators. They need to receive clearly presented, accurate information from which they can make judgements about the performance of the college. The issues that governors choose to explore, and especially the role they play in setting and monitoring targets for retention and achievement, can significantly influence the ethos of the college.

Positive messages

The importance of leadership that motivates staff and places student achievement at the forefront is increasingly recognised – for instance in the new inspection framework.

The RQA Programme has shown that effective leadership outside the senior management team, for instance of development projects and of staff teams intent on transferring examples of good practice, can have a significant impact on student achievement.

Governing bodies are increasingly monitoring students' performance, often as part of the annual self-assessment programmes. Some also monitor other indicators of quality – satisfaction questionnaires, for instance. Many governing bodies are shifting their focus to the issue of raising achievement from the post-incorporation preoccupation with finance, resources and strategic planning.

The debate for governors has moved on from 'should we set up a standards committee?' to 'how can we make such committees truly effective in promoting improvement in quality and achievement?'

There is now a range of advice and training available to governors (though its very extent may risk baffling them).

Remaining challenges

In a substantial minority of colleges governors still pay insufficient attention to retention and achievement rates, and to curriculum matters and remain preoccupied with the establishment of systems and the firm management of resources, including staff.

Senior staff do not always provide performance data to governors in a way that clearly identifies potential problem areas, perhaps because it would leave them open to criticism.

'Leadership' is still seen as a subset of management in much FE thinking, as opposed to the efficient management of systems being seen as something that needs to exist alongside and support the effective leadership of people. Systems can measure effectiveness, but it is leadership that will promote ongoing improvement – getting the best out of people, whether students or staff.

Crucial aspects of leadership for achievement take place at the level of course and cross-college teams, but it is often assumed that only senior management and classroom practice matter.

More emphasis needs to be given to the support of leaders outside the senior staff group, and to the establishment of effective communication from the bottom up as well as the top down. At present not only is leadership assumed to be a predominantly managerial activity, its transactional nature is emphasised at the expense of its potential to transform.

Although the prevailing culture in some colleges inhibits ongoing improvement, it does not preclude the possibility of effective leadership or progress in parts of the institution if individuals are prepared to take the initiative. Such initiative can also contribute to a culture change.

More thought may be required about the pros and cons of working with governors on their own, and/or in cross-college groups, as opposed to working jointly with governors and managers from a specific college.

Quality information and advice service

Description

The quality information and advice service acts as the first port of call for colleges seeking advice on any aspect of raising quality. It is managed by the Association of Colleges. An enquiry can take the form of a query about a quality improvement matter or a request for an information pack. Colleges have requested information and advice on a wide range of topics.

In the first two years up to September 2001, the quality information and advice service has been contacted by 98% of the college sector and there have been 1735 enquiries from other organisations, including external and specialist institutions. Most colleges have used the service three times or more and half have used the service for 20 or more enquiries and packs.

The service has developed 35 information packs to provide a rapid response to demand identified through the service. They cover a wide range of topics and have proved very popular – a total of 13,000 packs have been sent out.

Issues being addressed

The requests for information or advice received by the service are very varied but fall into two main categories:

- ❑ requests for information about current initiatives, such as the Common Inspection Framework, occupational standards for staff offering guidance, or Curriculum 2000
- ❑ requests for advice on how to implement or improve procedures and/or techniques (such as the use of value-added measures, observation of teaching and learning, or writing costed action plans) and about how to contact other colleges with relevant experience.

The importance of **up-to-date information** is obvious in a situation where there are ongoing changes to:

- ❑ national systems of planning, funding and inspection
- ❑ the national qualifications framework (including qualifications for staff)
- ❑ requirements for quality indicators and record-keeping
- ❑ the composition of the student body.

These changes mean that to remain effective, even provision that is recognised as being of high quality has to be constantly reviewed and developed if it is to remain fit for purpose.

In order to be able to offer **relevant advice** the service:

- keeps a database of colleges with current good practice in specific curriculum areas
- produces packs, many of which can be e-mailed. They offer, for example, guidelines, model policies and case studies of methods used to improve teaching and learning
- refers colleges to other strands of the RQA Programme and to the RQA website.

When surveyed, users indicated that the main uses of the packs were to:

- develop staff through exposure to good practice
- inform the development of new procedures
- improve retention and achievement
- prepare for the new inspection framework
- improve teaching and learning.

Positive messages

Many colleges have said how useful they find a point of contact where they can seek answers to their questions about how to raise quality. In a survey carried out in January 2001, the level of satisfaction expressed with both the quality of the advice given and the quality of the information packs was high: 96% recorded a satisfaction level of 1 or 2 (out of 5, 1 being high) with regard to the overall usefulness of the service.

Colleges that have achieved effective practice have shown themselves willing to share with others, both by being members of working groups that help to produce quality information packs, and by responding when contacted by other colleges or by the service.

Colleges that wish to improve their practice are increasingly finding ways of involving staff at all levels. Some have taken the whole group of staff working in a particular curriculum area to visit colleges that have been successful in achieving grade 1 inspection reports or beacon status.

Remaining challenges

Colleges are having to ensure that improvements in teaching and learning continue while at the same time they cope with significant changes to the context within which they operate.

Some colleges, although aware that they need to improve, are not clear about what steps to take first. The ability to refer them to consultants such as the quality improvement team is important in helping them to diagnose problems effectively and identify relevant solutions.

Similarly, although staff are getting better feedback about their level of performance it does not follow that they know what to do to improve, or that their manager has the subject expertise necessary to support them. Contact with other colleges, or access to material produced by them, can help overcome professional isolation.

There is increasing awareness of the importance of course management and team leadership in the improvement of teaching and learning. Some people in these posts have teaching loads that make it difficult to deliver on these functions or to learn from other colleges.

Summary of conclusions

This section summarises factors identified by the RQA Programme as making key contributions to the ongoing enhancement of quality and achievement.

Learner-centred improvement

Overall, any programme of quality improvement must centre on the needs of the learners, rather than on refining systems. The RQA model of learner-centred improvement seeks to maintain the focus on the learner in all strands. For example:

- leadership training is redefining leadership and management, with an emphasis on managing the learning environment
- benchmarking findings confirm the importance of learner judgements and satisfaction
- development project case studies focus on helping students achieve success.

The new LSC emphasis on meeting learner needs, entitlements and an equal opportunity for all to succeed (if carried through in policies) will strengthen this approach.

Comparison of performance

Some improvement can be prompted simply by the raised expectations and increased focus that comes from revealing the performance gap between the most and least effective colleges. This is most likely if staff are aware of the ways in which they can identify appropriate institutions with which they can make comparisons, and of evidence of the extent to which learner success is linked to college performance rather than the characteristics of the student body.

Uses and abuses of benchmarking

Benchmarking procedures can be used for more than the comparison of results. They can be used diagnostically, to identify processes that can be improved, and to create a professional dialogue between and within colleges. This developmental potential can be hindered if benchmarking is only associated in the minds of staff with 'naming and shaming'.

Access by all staff to a full range of information

College information systems should move beyond producing accurate returns to funding bodies and enabling the senior management team to hold other staff accountable. They should produce data in a format and to a schedule that enables staff at all levels to make better informed professional decisions. Other data than that required by external bodies, such as that which results from analysis of satisfaction surveys and attendance patterns, can also be used to promote the enhancement of quality.

Learning from the experience of others

Many college staff can feel professionally isolated, and membership of networks that share experience of effective practice can stimulate their thinking and planning, as can access to advice services and materials. Enabling staff teams to visit other colleges in order to study effective provision can be a stimulus to promoting improvement.

Support for the transfer of effective practice

Studying what others have found to be effective practice, and the sharing and comparison of experience, undoubtedly stimulates ideas and the motivation to change. However, rarely – if ever – can a practice from elsewhere keep its effectiveness or become embedded if it is merely transplanted into a new context. Either the practice or the context (or both) will require adaptation and further development. Indeed, frustration can result if attempts are made to introduce a technique or procedure prematurely, before the groundwork has been done. In other words, learning of 'good practice' elsewhere is often just the start of a developmental process that needs continuing effort and support.

Project management and evaluation of learning outcomes

Many colleges, and parts of colleges, are not good at planning, resourcing and implementing such development processes. Adopting a project approach can be very helpful. In order to access external funding, it is usually necessary to clarify aims and objectives, select an appropriate method, and specify a realistic schedule, including 'milestones' at which progress will be reported. This approach can also be adopted when an activity is internally sponsored.

The objectives should include reference to measurable improvements in learner performance. Projects should be evaluated in these terms, and not just in terms of whether a particular initiative has been implemented as planned.

Help with diagnosis

Very often, the greatest issue for colleges or departments that are in difficulty is that of initial diagnosis. External consultancy can be invaluable, though when requesting such help colleges may make false assumptions about the kind of support required or about the nature or importance of the problem. It is therefore important that the consultants they use are not committed to deploying a certain technique, or to working in a certain topic area, and that the consultants can draw in other expertise if initial diagnosis shows this to be necessary.

Analysis before action

A particular issue that applies equally to project work, sharing good practice and the brief given to consultants, is the potential for confusion between causes, symptoms and solutions. For instance, a college may decide that it needs to introduce a system in which an attendance officer follows up absentee students with the aim of increasing retention, without first investigating:

- what other techniques are available, and their comparative opportunity cost
- whether retention is a problem in itself, or a symptom of other problems, for instance with initial guidance or with teaching styles
- the extent to which the success of the initiative can be measured in terms of retention, whatever the achievement levels are
- whether this is a localised issue, that can be addressed within the section concerned, or requires a broader perspective to be taken.

Building on staff interests

On the other hand, there is also the possibility of 'paralysis from analysis', and it may be productive to allow staff who are enthusiastic about an idea to have their head, as long as the project design and evaluation allow the original assumptions to be tested.

Some areas tend to be neglected

RQA findings¹⁹ show that:

- in order to promote student success, a college is more likely to opt for enhancing its support services, than planning what may be necessary changes in course design and delivery
- colleges seem much better attuned to identifying weaknesses and acting upon them, than to building on their strong points.

Therefore development plans should be reviewed with these possible omissions in mind.

Appropriate approaches to leadership and management

Key to much of the above is the ability of those in direct contact with front-line staff to offer effective leadership and support. Their capacity for doing so may be hindered by assumptions that:

- the main duty of managers is to establish a primarily contractual relation with their subordinates, and to monitor their compliance with these contracts and with other college systems
- only the actions of college principals, on the one hand, and of teachers in the classroom or workshop, on the other, have a decisive influence on quality.

The importance of course management

Because of the size and diversity of colleges, there is considerably variation in the culture of different sections and in their attitude to improvement activities. A college department may be as large as the average secondary school, and sited away from other sections. Staff and students may have little opportunity to meet colleagues from other areas. Even within departments, it is the work of a team that determines the quality of the student experience on a course, and the leaders of these and other teams, who may not be of senior rank to other members, play a crucial role.

A culture that favours quality improvement

A consistent message from all strands of the RQA Programme is the importance of what is usually called the 'culture' of a college, if quality and achievement are to be effectively promoted. Specific evidence of weaknesses in this area has been provided by several of the programme's strands.²⁰ An appropriate culture enables staff to learn from failure rather than being blamed for it, and to take risks while accepting responsibility. The culture should also be one in which the highest priority is attached to the quality of the student experience and learner achievement. Compliance with systems should be seen merely as a means to this end, rather than an end in itself.

The importance of staff morale and effective communication

The RQA Programme has evidence that there is a positive correlation between staff satisfaction and student satisfaction.²¹ In turn, student satisfaction is positively correlated with retention and achievement. It is therefore worrying that, on average, staff satisfaction is low, especially within general FE colleges. In addressing this issue, principals and governing bodies will note the further evidence of the importance staff attach to communication and consultation. At a general level, staff need to be informed about current initiatives and strategic priorities. At a personal level, staff need to receive honest feedback that not only identifies weaknesses but indicates how they can improve. Communication also needs to be two-way, and characterised by mutual respect. Staff should have means by which they can inform their managers about the effectiveness of the organisation as they and their students experience it, and be able to feed in their ideas for improvement. By the same token, staff as well as managers should take responsibility for initiating change.

Improvement needs to be ongoing

Now that college systems for measuring effectiveness and establishing accountability are in place and maturing, there are hopeful signs that colleges may be able to turn their attention to the more subtle issue of continual improvement. Ongoing development work is required just to maintain quality because of changes in economic and social priorities, qualifications systems and the composition of the student body. It is important that the new systems being considered by the LSC are evaluated in terms of their ability to enhance ongoing improvement. There is always a risk that they may unintentionally delay or even hinder such improvement by becoming ends in themselves.

Integrated rather than piecemeal activities

The quality of the students' experience and the level of their attainment are maximised when the efforts of individual staff form part of a holistic, strategic approach to ongoing improvement. National and regional bodies, including government, need to be aware of this, and to avoid their own initiatives creating a series of piecemeal activities in colleges.

Further reading

Most of these RQA publications are available free from LSDA.

Closing the achievement gap: colleges making a difference

Peter Davies (LSDA 2001)

Following *Differential achievement: what does the ISR profile tell us?* this report aims to clarify the relative influence on student achievement of institutional performance and demographic factors, and to guide colleges on effective strategies to raise achievement.

A college guide to benchmarking

Jane Owen (FEDA 1999)

The ongoing emphasis on meeting customer and stakeholder needs in education means that colleges continuously have to improve the level of service provided. As a result college managers need to use the full range of tools available to them to keep pace with changing requirements.

College improvement: the voice of teachers and managers

Paul Martinez (LSDA 2001)

This summary of findings from the first round of development projects gives voice to the teachers, tutors, managers and student services staff in over 800 colleges about what really works to raise achievement and improve retention.

Consultancy for free: making the most of complaints

Jane Owen (LSDA 2001)

This guide to dealing with complaints starts from the premise that very few people want to do a bad job. It shows learning providers how to improve services by using feedback from students, potential students and customers, and how to learn from mistakes.

Differential achievement: what does the ISR profile tell us?

Peter Davies and Terry Rudden (FEDA 2000)

What is the relation between low rates of student retention and achievement and the ISR profiles of the students? Can the majority of differences be explained by geodemographic factors, or the college ethos?

Governance issues: raising student achievement

Chris Horsfall (LSDA 2001)

How have governing bodies responded to the challenge of raising standards? What issues are raised in the process? What good practice can be identified?

Governance today: rising to the challenge of raising quality and achievement

Chris Horsfall (LSDA 2001)

A report that provides a summary of the facts governors need to work effectively in the new LSC context. It offers questions and actions that governors might ask of college management and explores in detail topics such as learner views and equality of opportunity that have gained new emphasis.

Great expectations: setting targets for students

Paul Martinez (LSDA 2001)

This report aims to encourage the wider use of target setting for individual students and trainees in the learning and skills sector.

Improving college effectiveness: raising quality and achievement

Bridget Somekh *et al.* (FEDA 1999)

This report contains a robust, critical review of research, inspection and development activities, and summarises extensive work on effectiveness and improvement in the schools sector as it applies to colleges.

It's a people thing: demystifying college information

Jane Owen, Jeff Alterman and Phill Walkley (FEDA 2000)

This plain English guide to college information systems gives colleges practical information and examples of good practice.

Leadership issues: raising achievement

Edited by Chris Horsfall (LSDA 2001)

Looking at leadership, and how it affects student achievement in FE colleges, this publication covers relevant literature, the differences between management and leadership, the role of middle managers and training for team leaders.

Leadership revisited

Chris Horsfall (LSDA 2001)

This publication looks at the role of the course team leader and how it has been affected by the introduction of the Common Inspection Framework.

Listening to staff

Jane Owen and Peter Davies (LSDA 2001)

This book contains the results of LSDA's survey of staff opinions about their jobs in colleges. Despite dissatisfaction the results clearly show that staff genuinely want to be involved in improving education in the learning and skills sector.

Outcomes of adult learning: taking the debate forward

Amanda Hayes, Peter Lavender, Anna Reisenberger and John Vorhaus (FEDA 2000)

How we recognise and value the broader outcome of adult learning is a matter for continuous debate. The challenge is to devise robust standards, which are sensitive to the needs of all potential learners, if we are to encourage adults and disenchanted young people to become lifelong learners.

Raising achievement: a guide to successful strategies

Paul Martinez (FEDA 2000)

With the aid of case studies, this guide looks at the varying strategies colleges have adopted for raising achievement among different student groups. Above all, it shows that colleges can make a difference.

Further reading 51

Successful tutoring: good practice for managers and tutors

Muriel Green (LSDA 2001)

This guide looks at the way the tutor has moved from a largely autonomous position to an extended and more clearly defined role with a clear link to learning.

Sustaining excellence

Rosemary Moore and Anna Reisenberger (FEDA 2000)

What are the characteristics of colleges that have performed well and gained top grades over more than one inspection round? This book identifies common features that have enabled high-performing colleges to reach and then maintain excellence.

Value added in vocational qualifications

Paul Martinez and Terry Rudden (LSDA research report 2001)

This report explores the relationship between prior attainment and subsequent achievement in GNVQs and AVCEs. Key issues discussed include: entry criteria, target setting, benchmarking and quality improvement.

References

- 1 *Guide for college governors*. FEFC, 1994.
- 2 *Governance issues: raising student achievement*. p15, LSDA, 2001.
- 3 *College research*, spring 2001, vol 4 no 2.
- 4 *Quality and standards in further education in England*, Chief Inspector's annual report. FEFC, 2001.
- 5 *Funding learning*. p19, FEFC, 1992.
- 6 *Governance issues: raising student achievement*. p16, LSDA, 2001.
- 7 *Closing the achievement gap*. LSDA, 2001.
- 8 *Listening to staff*. LSDA, 2001.
- 9 *Self-assessment for improvement*. FEDA, 2000.
- 10 For a guide to college information systems that offers practical information and examples of good practice see *It's a people thing: demystifying college information*. FEDA, 2000.
- 11 *Successful tutoring* (LSDA 2001) and the RQA quality information and advice service packs.
- 12 *Messages from the front*. LSDA, forthcoming.
- 13 *Governance issues: raising student achievement*.
- 14 *Differential achievement: closing the achievement gap* (FEDA 2000) and *Raising achievement: guide to successful strategies* (FEDA 2000).
- 15 *Listening to staff*. LSDA, 2001.
- 16 *Sustaining excellence*. FEDA, 2000.
- 17 *Governance issues: raising student achievement*. LSDA, 2001.
- 18 *Leadership issues: raising achievement*. LSDA, 2001.
- 19 *Closing the achievement gap*. LSDA, 2001.
- 20 Including results from use of the Learning PROBE diagnostic tool, reports of the QIT consultants, and surveys conducted by the research and evaluation strand.
- 21 *Listening to staff*. LSDA, 2001.



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